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One journalist vs. the KGB

By Glenn Garvin
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Imagine your surprise if you picked up a newspaper this afternoon and discovered that it contained a verbatim transcript of a telephone conversation you had with a friend a few days ago.

And then imagine that the newspaper said your seemingly innocent conversation about what went on at work that day was actually conducted in code, and that what you were really talking about was blowing up buildings, assassinating several dozen of your enemies, and betraying your country to a foreign power.

Paul Anastasi doesn't have to imagine.

"I just couldn't believe it," he recalls. "It was a shocking experience. I hope you don't ever have to go through it. The largest-circulation daily newspaper in

Greece... saying I was a terrorist..."

For Paul Anastasi this was just the latest chapter in a life that increasingly resembles a novel co-authored by Ian Fleming and Franz Kafka. Five years ago Mr. Anastasi wrote a book accusing the popular Greek newspaper Ethnos of financial ties to the KGB, the Soviet secret police. Since then he has been sentenced to jail, his phones have been tapped, he has been accused of plotting mass murder, and he has been publically denounced as a CIA agent plotting nothing less than the conquest of all Europe for the United States.

"It's been distracting," he observes with heroic understatement.

Of course, Mr. Anastasi — a newspaperman who covers Greece for The New York Times and the London Daily Telegraph — has given nearly as good as he's gotten. His book became a best seller, the men he

accused of wiretapping him have been sentenced to jail, and he managed to get his own prison sentence thrown out by the Greek Supreme Court.

Yet another chapter in this real-

life thriller is now unfolding in Greek courtrooms. Three hearings were held recently in cases between Mr. Anastasi and the publisher of Ethnos, including mutual assertions of libel. Greece is now waiting until after Sunday's election and a month of court vacation for the verdicts in these much-publicized suits. Although Mr. Anastasi's earlier jail sentence has been annulled by the Supreme Court, he may still go to prison. He swears he would rather do that than pay a nickel in damages if he should lose the upcoming libel suit.

"The KGB won't get any moral or financial help from me," he says. "They already have too much."

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The funny thing is that Paul Anastasi is a liberal. When Greece had a right-wing regime, he was always in trouble with the government.

"I was very much against the former regime," he says. "I was called in several times by the former press secretary, who felt my reporting was too leftist. They were always warning me to stop it."

Nonetheless, he was fascinated by the newspaper Ethnos, which began publishing in 1981 and quickly became the most popular newspaper in Greece.

Ethnos was the country's first tabloid newspaper. It was one of the first papers in Greece to use color photos. It has a clean, modern layout, and its sports reporting is extensive and well-written. The Wall Street Journal recently called it "the most professionally produced newspaper in Greece."

But what interested Mr. Anastasi was the newspaper's politics, which were unabashedly pro-Soviet and anti-United States. According to Ethnos (as reported in The Wall Street Journal and from Ethnos clippings seen by this reporter), the Ber-

lin against U.S. aggression. Poland's Solidarity union is a CIA tool. The pope is a Mafia gangster. The Soviet Union is the "world's first peace bloc." Ronald Reagan is a "paranoid monster." What intrigued Mr. Anastasi was speculation among other Greek publications that Ethnos was somehow bankrolled by the Soviet Union.

"I had heard it before, and I was very skeptical," he says. "I found it very difficult to believe... I could never imagine at that time, that my investigation would have turned up so many KGB agents, and so many documents and pictures which gave evidence of the joint publishing venture with the Soviets."

Mr. Anastasi amassed his evidence from a Greek communist named Yannis Yannikios, a jilted business partner of George Bobolas, who publishes Ethnos. Mr. Yannikios was suing Mr. Bobolas; he claims he was unfairly squeezed out of the company that publishes Ethnos.

Mr. Yannikios' lawsuit was not going well. Mr. Anastasi began meeting with him and he began probing. In all, there would be more than 40 interviews with Mr. Yannikios and his family.

"He gradually presented me more and more evidence," Mr. Anastasi says. "He would tell me something, and I would say, 'Yes, but how can you prove it?' He'd hand me a copy of a document. I'd say, 'This is a photocopy, this won't do.' So out comes the original..."

"He had everything, stacks of things. I don't think anyone will ever get the chance again to get so many documents, photographs and telexes to document a KGB operation."

The story Mr. Anastasi heard from Mr. Yannikios went like this:

In 1977, after suggestions from Communist Party leaders, Mr. Yannikios formed a partnership with Mr. Bobolas. The next year the men published a Greek-language version of The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, in cooperation with the Soviet copyright office.

The Soviets were so pleased with sales of the encyclopedia — more than 30,000 sets — that they asked Mr. Yannikios to submit a proposal for a daily newspaper. In 1979 he gave them a set of plans for what became Ethnos. But then the Soviets decided to deal with Mr. Bobolas alone, pushing Mr. Yannikios out of the picture.

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During one of the various legal proceedings surrounding the case, Mr. Yannikios' son, Christos, described in court a meeting he had witnessed between his father and a Soviet official.

Why are you doing this to me? Mr. Yannikios demanded of the Soviet. I've been a loyal communist all my life. I was even sentenced to death for fighting on the communist side during the Greek civil war. But now you give the newspaper over to Bobolas, who after all is just another capitalist.

The Soviet official was sympathetic, but wouldn't give, according to the younger Mr. Yannikios. "Mr. Bobolas now owns Ethnos, and you know how important that newspaper is for us," the Soviet said.

The Soviet official, according to the younger Mr. Yannikios, was named Vassily Sitnikov, deputy director of the Soviet copyright office. Mr. Sitnikov has been identified by several Soviet defectors as deputy director of the KGB's disinformation department.

The elder Mr. Yannikios identified to Mr. Anastasi the other Soviets who were involved in the startup of Ethnos:

- Boris Pankin, director of the Soviet copyright office. (Various defectors have identified him as a one-time head of the KGB's disinformation branch.)

- Ivan Udaltchov, former Soviet ambassador to Greece. (The Greek press labeled him a KGB agent in 1976.)

- Evgeni Chistiakov, former press attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Greece. (The Greek government expelled him as a spy in 1980.)

All this and more appeared in Mr. Anastasi's book, "Take The Nation In Your Hands," published in 1983. ("Ethnos" is the Greek word for "nation," and the book's title is actually an ironic use of the newspaper's own advertising slogan.) Mr. Anastasi also identified several of the paper's foreign correspondents as Communist Party functionaries, and

offered a content analysis that he said proved Ethnos systematically distorts news to favor the Soviets and to discredit the West.

The newspaper's officials were none too pleased, to put it mildly.

"At first there was just a stunned silence," Mr. Anastasi says. "There was no reaction from Ethnos. But other papers were all carrying it on the front page. They [Ethnos] had to do something. At least, that's my analysis. If everyone had ignored it, perhaps they wouldn't have done anything."

What they did was sue for criminal libel. Greek law says that a person who believes he has been libeled can sue for both civil libel (to collect monetary damages) and criminal libel (to put the libeler in jail). Ethnos decided to press for criminal charges.

During the trial, the newspaper's officials denied that Ethnos was a KGB mouthpiece. The editor, Alexander Filipopoulos, said the paper was merely "profoundly anti-imperialistic, profoundly demo-

cratic, free, truly objective," to quote from a Wall Street Journal account of the trial. Repeated telephone calls this week to the newspaper's offices for its comment on this report, however, were unavailing.

The attorneys for Ethnos repeatedly referred to Mr. Anastasi, a Greek Cypriot, as a "foreigner" with no right to comment on the Greek press. When Mr. Anastasi brought in six foreign correspondents to testify as character witnesses for him, the newspaper's attorney suggested they were secret agents and ought to be investigated.

Most damaging, though, was the failure of Yannis Yannikios to testify. Shortly before the libel trial, Mr. Yannikios settled his long-standing suit against Mr. Bobolas, his former business partner. Mr. Yannikios got \$650,000 and was suddenly unavailable as a witness, although his son and his former attorney both took the stand on behalf of Mr. Anastasi.

In the end, Mr. Anastasi lost and was sentenced to two years in jail. The three judges did not dis-

pute the evidence in his book, but said there wasn't enough of it to justify his accusation that the publisher of Ethnos was "an agent of influence" for the Soviet Union.

The court also banned the book, although the entire printing of 10,000 copies had sold out by then. "That's a best seller — by Greek standards, anyway," Mr. Anastasi says with a smile. "The ban didn't have much effect. We didn't have any more copies. There are probably a few left floating around in lawyers' offices."

Mr. Anastasi believes the reaction of Greece's socialist government made it easier for Ethnos to win its case against him.

"I knew Ethnos would be angry, of course," he says. "But I didn't expect that kind of government reaction, no. I always viewed this, and I still view this, as an effort to help the Greek press. And to expose the worst kind of threat the press can

face — that is, Soviet disinformation. I remain deeply disappointed that some members of the government have tried to discredit my work . . .

"One minister said publicly, right after [Ethnos] filed their suit, that the government would see to it that I was speedily dealt with in the courts. Another said the book was 'a thriller, appropriate for holiday reading,' even though he admitted he hadn't read it himself."

Mr. Anastasi promptly appealed his conviction, and meanwhile filed his own libel suit against the editor and publisher of Ethnos for calling him "a tramp" and "a foreign agent." It was thrown out on the grounds that these accusations were "justified reaction" to his book.

Then, last July, Ethnos published a transcript of a phone conversation Mr. Anastasi had held with an Athens attorney. The newspaper said the transcript proved that Mr. Anastasi was a CIA agent who was planning to blow up the Ethnos building and then to "destabilize" all of Europe.

The paper said it had "tens of tapes" of Mr. Anastasi's phone conversations that had been mailed to the paper anonymously by members of his "group of agents who apparently disagreed with the murderous plans of their bosses and decided to warn us against the intentions of this ruthless group."

The transcript appeared harmless enough — Mr. Anastasi and the attorney were discussing their theories about KGB manipulation of news media — but Ethnos explained that this was all secret code to cover up their real, homicidal plans.

"I was — how can I tell you?" Mr. Anastasi says of reading the story for the first time. "Imagine that you called your mother up: 'Hi mom, we're going for a swim tomorrow.' And then you read it in the news-

paper, and the newspaper is saying 'mom' is code for a secret agent, and 'going for a swim' is the code for an attack? What can you say? How can you prove anything?"

It had never occurred to Mr. Anastasi that his phone might be tapped. Now he suspects it constantly. "I've never been the same since it happened," he says. "I can never feel safe on the phone in Greece again. It made me very concerned about what could happen next. The first thing I did was hide a duplicate set of all my records and documents in an abandoned marble quarry next to my house."

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Although the story about the wiretapped phone conversation was a low point for Mr. Anastasi, it proved to be a disastrous mistake for Ethnos. The Greek constitution has airtight prohibitions on wiretaps, or using material obtained through wiretaps. Suddenly Ethnos officials found themselves in court, facing a criminal charge.

The court eventually cleared them of placing the tap themselves but convicted the editor and publisher of making illegal use of telephone conversations. In clearing them of actually placing the tap, the prosecutor said he believed Soviet agents probably installed it and then gave the tapes to Ethnos.

During the trial, the prosecutor also elicited the embarrassing revelation that the two men from Ethnos had told government officials in the Ministry of Public Order that they had the illegal tapes and were going to publish their contents, and that the government did nothing. The Ethnos officials were sentenced to five months in jail, although under Greek law they can avoid jail by paying a \$500 fine.

Other legal developments began turning in Mr. Anastasi's favor, as well. He won a criminal libel suit against Mr. Filipopoulos and Mr. Bobolas, and they were sentenced to four months in jail (although that sentence, too, can be avoided by payment of a \$360 fine). The Supreme Court overturned the jail sentence against Mr. Anastasi on technical grounds, and it also said that his civil libel suit against Ethnos must be allowed to go forward.

Mr. Anastasi says he would not have refiled his libel suit if Mr. Bobolas hadn't sued him again: "That's when we decided to hit back," he says. "He's a multimillionaire asking for money from me, and for my imprisonment. I don't want his imprisonment, but I want his money." What Mr. Bobolas wants remains the subject of speculation. Repeated attempts this week by The Washington Times to contact him in Greece met with no success. Ethnos personnel based in the United States failed to return

phone calls from The Times.

Mr. Anastasi says that winning the lawsuit will bring him no personal profit. "If I win, I'll use the money to establish a school of journalism in Greece. The fascinating thing about Greece has been that 65 percent of the Greek media — of the total cir-

ulation, that is — is represented by publications that serve as a platform for Soviet disinformation. Greece is steadily emerging as the prime example in the West where Soviet disinformation, Soviet media infiltration, has gone deeper than in any other country.

"It's to the point where Soviet opinion has influenced public opinion, and, subsequently, government policy, to a point where it has contributed greatly to the strain between Greece and the West."

Mr. Anastasi intends to write a book about his experience. Meanwhile, he is continuing to work as a newspaperman. At one time, he wasn't sure that would be possible.

"It was a make-or-break situation," he says. "I could really have been destroyed, professionally. My work was impeded. I found myself in and out of courts all the time, without much time to work. Above all, it was a question of my credibility. If my credibility had been damaged, I would have been destroyed."

Instead, it is the credibility of Ethnos that has been damaged, at least in some small way. Although the paper still sells 180,000 copies a day, more than any other Greek daily, Ethnos officials have complained repeatedly that Mr. Anastasi's book aborted a major circulation drive. If it weren't for him, they say, the newspaper would have 300,000 readers by now.

That is of some comfort to Mr. Anastasi. But it's not enough.

"Ethnos is definitely less useful to the Soviets, in my opinion, than it originally was," he muses. "But it's more discredited abroad than it is in Greece. This is the paradox... The government should have had a formal investigation and should have put pressure on the paper to break off ties with the Soviet officials."

"The government should exert moral pressure towards putting an end to Soviet disinformation in the media. Instead, some ministers looked as if they sanctioned the whole thing."

He has been speaking slowly, choosing his words precisely. If there is one thing Paul Anastasi has learned in the last two years, it is that sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can get you thrown in jail.

"You have to be careful when you say things like this," he nods. "They have laws about contempt of court, and — 'contempt of authority' as they call it. They have strange laws down there."